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Viewing cable 08BOGOTA2178, URIBE THIRD TERM ISSUE DOMINATES REFORM EFFORT,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08BOGOTA2178	2008-06-17 19:41	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bogota

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 002178

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2018

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SUBJECT: URIBE THIRD TERM ISSUE DOMINATES REFORM EFFORT,

PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER PLANS, AND SCANDALS

REF: BOGOTA 1597

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Key presidential advisors told us President Uribe has not decided whether to seek a third term, but agreed he would have to make his intentions clear in the second half of 2008.

Several GOC coalition and opposition leaders plan to run in 2010, including Cambio Radical leader German Vargas Lleras, former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo, and former Bogota Mayor Lucho Garzon. Other GOC contenders, including Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, await Uribe's decision. The media speculated that former President Cesar Gaviria might run, but Gaviria told us he would focus on building a broad political movement to oppose a third Uribe term. The GOC killed a political reform bill, fearing it would undermine its control in Congress. Uribe repeatedly attacked the credibility of former Congresswoman Yidis Medina, who has testified that she received bribes in exchange for voting for the constitutional amendment that allowed Uribe to run for a second term. End Summary.

URIBE REELECTION DECISION PENDING

2. (C) Presidential Advisors Bernardo Moreno, Jose Obdulio Gaviria and Fabio Valencia Cossio told us President Uribe has not decided whether to seek a possible third term. U Party Senator Marta Lucia Ramirez said, "his head tells him not to run, but his heart tells him yes." Moreno and Gaviria said Uribe would delay any third term announcement for as long as possible to avoid lame duck status, but agreed he would need to state his intentions in the second half of 2008 so that constitutional reform could clear Congress with time to complete the rest of the amendment process. Uribe would likely opt to amend the constitution via the referendum process which requires a congressional vote on the referendum question, Constitutional Court review, and the participation of at least 25 percent of registered voters in the referendum--approximately 7 million. Uribe's effort in 2003 to enact numerous constitutional reforms via referendum failed due to low turnout.

3. (C) Gaviria said Uribe's indecision reflects his concern that he has no qualified political heir. Defense Minister Santos is the strongest option, but Gaviria and Moreno stressed that Santos "is not a Casa de Narino insider." Presidential Communications Director Jorge Mario Eastman told us Santos' recent public announcement of FARC founder Pedro Marin's death prior to notifying Uribe raised doubts about his reliability. Gaviria mentioned Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, Agricultural Minister Andres Arias, and Colombian Ambassador to the U.K. Noemi Sanin as possible candidates, but said all have weaknesses. Gaviria said at one time Uribe considered independent and former Medellin Mayor Sergio Fajardo as a possible successor, but the two broke over Fajardo's refusal to identify fully with Uribe's agenda. Ramirez told us Gaviria, Moreno, and Restrepo are urging Uribe to run again.

CANDIDATES EMERGE FOR 2010

4. (C) Despite the uncertainty over Uribe's intentions, politicians from the Uribista coalition parties and the opposition have announced plans to run for president in 2010.

German Vargas Lleras (leader of Cambio Radical) resigned his Senate seat in May to run. He told us he does not favor a third Uribe term, and has hinted at a return to the Liberal Party. Cambio Radical controls 15 seats in the Senate and 20 in the House, which could represent the swing votes in any effort to allow a third term. Former Defense Minister Rafael Pardo (Liberal Party) said he plans to run. Senator Gustavo Petro (Polo Party) and former Bogota Mayor Luis "Lucho" Garzon (Polo) are also candidates. Sergio Fajardo resigned

from his political commentator job in June to position himself as a candidate. Polo President Carlos Gaviria, who finished second to Uribe in 2006, told us he would not run again, but far-left elements of the Polo will push hard for Gaviria to enter the race since they have no other

high-profile standard bearer.

15. (C) The media has speculated that former President and Liberal Party Chief Cesar Gaviria may seek a new term, possibly in alliance with the Polo, but Gaviria told us he did not intend to run and would focus instead on creating a united political front to oppose a third Uribe term. GOC officials -- including Defense Minister Santos and Interior and Justice Minister Carlos Holguin -- have their possible candidacies on hold pending Uribe's decision. They would need to step down from the cabinet by May, 2009 to be eligible to run in 2010.

POLITICAL REFORM BILL DIES

16. (C) The GOC killed a high-profile political reform bill aimed at restoring Congressional legitimacy in early June. The bill would have punished political parties with a loss of seats if members were found to have ties to illegal armed groups (reftel). Moreno said the legislation was part of a radical opposition's effort to strip the GOC of its Congressional majorities. He said the bill would have enabled the opposition to block any third term effort, and would have weakened Uribe's capacity to govern. Coalition Senator Efraim Cepeda and Representative Roy Barreras told us members remain concerned about Congress' legitimacy in the wake of the para-political scandal, and were shocked at the GOC's last minute decision to let the bill die in Commission.

17. (SBU) Moreno told us the GOC would introduce a new, constitutional reform bill in the Congressional session starting July 20 to maintain the political initiative and address legitimacy concerns. Such a package would propose changes in the electoral regime, new sanctions and inhibitions for legislators, and congressional administrative reform. Uribe installed a commission, comprised of academics and former politicians, on June 16 to review and propose a new reform package. Opposition leaders and some in the GOC coalition dismissed the group as unrepresentative, and a threat to congressional independence.

SCANDALS CONTINUE

18. (C) The April wave of arrest orders and new investigations from the Supreme Court in the para-political scandal slowed in May and June, but allegations over alleged vote buying in Uribe's first reelection effort by former Congresswoman Yidis Medina continue to dog the GOC. Jose Obdulio Gaviria told us Medina's charges create doubts about the legitimacy of the first reelection, complicating a second attempt. The presidency issued six communiques the week of June 9 attacking Medina's credibility, and Uribe repeatedly and personally criticized her character. Valencia said Uribe's attacks had successfully destroyed Medina's credibility, and predicted the scandal would not implicate Uribe directly. Still, he warned that former-Interior Minister Sabas Pretelt and Minister of Social Protection Diego Palacio -- accused of managing the GOC bribery effort -- would have a difficult period ahead as the investigation into her allegations proceeds.

BROWNFIELD

=====CABLE ENDS=====